# The Naxalite Movement (1967-1972): A Critique from the perspective of Postcolonial Theory

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by

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## Introduction

The present study focuses on the Naxalite Movement that gained eminence in the 1960s and 1970s in India. The word Naxal or Naxalite is a generic term used to refer different militant Communist groups operating in different parts of India. The Naxalites claim to be fighting for the rights of the oppressed and neglected people in India, who have been neglected by the electoral processes and untouched by India's development. These oppressed groups include the *adivasis, dalits* and the poorest of poor such as landless labourers who often work for less than the mandated minimum wages (Srivastava, 2011). The Naxalites claim that they are fighting against oppression and exploitation with the sole objective of creating a classless society. The ultimate political objective of the Naxalite movement is to build a leftist alternative and mobilize people against increased imperialist intervention and pro-imperialist policies pursued by the Indian government.

The Naxalite movement is undoubtedly the most significant political movement since India's independence. It has been the most long-lasting movement and despite its fragmented nature, a continuing thread with some variations can be seen in its ideological thrust, strategy and tactics of mobilization of different groups within its reach. It is unique in that it tends to mobilize the most subdued and socially marginalized sections and exposes the hitherto unseen sharp fissures in the society, politics and economy. The Naxalite movement has been previously studied from the Nationalist or Marxist theoretical perspectives. The present work aims to study the Naxalite movement from the postcolonial theoretical perspective. Postcolonial theory is about the people and their personal experiences in the aftermath of decolonization. Since the Naxalite movement is an important event of postcolonial Indian history, the present work aims to do a critical analysis of the movement in the postcolonial context.

## Objectives

The Naxalite movement is an important part of the history of modern India in the post-independence era. There have been several literary attempts to trace the evolution of the Naxalite movement but none have studied the movement from the postcolonial perspective. The several studies on Postcolonial theory have mainly dealt with the postcolonial literature and concepts whereas the studies on the Naxalite Movement have focused majorly on a descriptive analysis and criticism from a theoretical perspective other than the postcolonial

perspective. But the Naxal movement took place in postcolonial India as an aftermath of the semi-feudal and semi-colonial policies of the independent state. The postcolonial perspective and concepts can help in decoding the Naxal ideology and analysing the Naxalite movement.

The overall objective of the current study is to analyze the Naxalite movement in India from a postcolonial perspective. This objective is comprehensive and hence, the following sub-objectives are defined to build the framework of the study:

- *To critique the Naxalite Movement from the perspective of Postcolonial Theory*
- *To give a new interpretation and perspective to the Naxalite Movement using the concepts of Postcolonial theory*

**7. Hypotheses**

On the basis of a comprehensive literature review, the following hypotheses were chosen for the current research problem:

- ***Ho: There are elements of congruence between the Naxalite Movement and the principles of the Postcolonial Theory.***
- ***Ha: There is elements of incongruence between the Naxalite Movement and the principles of the Postcolonial Theory.***

The Null hypothesis covers principles of postcolonial theory such as mimicry, hybridity and otherness. The sub-hypotheses for the current research are;

- $H_{o1}$ : There is no congruence between the Naxalite movement and the *mimicry* principle of the postcolonial theory.
- $H_{a1}$ : There is congruence between the Naxalite movement and the *mimicry* principle of the postcolonial theory.
- $H_{o2}$ : There is no congruence between the Naxalite movement and the *hybridity* principle of the postcolonial theory.
- $H_{a2}$ : There is congruence between the Naxalite movement and the *hybridity* principle of the postcolonial theory.
- $H_{03}$ : There is no congruence between the Naxalite movement and the *otherness* principle of the postcolonial theory.

- $H_{a3}$ : There is congruence between the Naxalite movement and the *otherness* principle of the postcolonial theory.

The hypotheses stated above comply with the five characteristics of hypotheses as stated by Neuman (2000): a hypothesis should have at least two variables, describe a cause-effect relationship, express a prediction or expected future outcome, logically link to a research question and a theory, be falsifiable, and be shown to be true or false.

**Methodology**

In order to offer a well-founded and valid critique, it is prerogative that the current research provides solid, evidence-based conclusions. Such conclusions can be reached only through knowledge gained from a well-constructed research design and competent data analysis. The choice of research methodology depends on the nature of the research problem. Morgan and Smircich (1980) suggest that the actual suitability of a research method derives from the nature of the social phenomena to be studied. The research methodology defines the research purposes, activities, procedures, measurements and applications. It is an intellectual activity that specifically deals with the manner in which data is collected, analysed and interpreted. It determines the framing of explanations rising from the observations made.

It is important to understand the philosophical assumptions underlying any research since the assumptions help researchers in getting clarity about the research design. This requires considering the type of data needed to justify the research objectives and consequently how it is to be collected and interpreted. It also requires considering how this will provide answers to the basic research questions under investigation. For the purpose of this research, the researcher adopted a phenomenological approach it aims to capture the rich complexities of social situations that are the driving force of the Naxalite movement. The current research problem can be best answered using the phenomenological approach as it provides a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study; helps to understand the subjective points of view; provides comprehensive evidence; and gives rich insights from the people at the crux of the research problem.

Furthermore, the researcher has chosen a qualitative approach as the research question is more about understanding a theoretical stand from an alternative perspective than a mere collection and interpretation of data about any event or occurrence. This approach helps in gathering information from reliable sources that are directly related to or impacted by the

research problem. The questionnaire method was used to collect data and the questionnaire was designed in two sections. Section A intended to collect information regarding the Naxalite movement in order to prove its congruence with the postcolonial theory; and Section B included questions regarding the movement to prove its non-congruence with the postcolonial theory. Each section comprised of ten questions pertaining to different aspects of the Naxalite movement. The respondents were asked questions regarding their understanding of the different aspects of the Naxalite movement.

The researcher used the judgement non-probability sampling method for the sample pool. Judgement sampling involves the selection of a group from the population on the basis of available information assuming they are representative of the entire population (Pandey and Pandey, 2015). This method was selected for sampling since the sample members are selected on the basis of researcher's own judgement. The research is focused on analysing the Naxalite movement using postcolonial theoretical tools and according to the researcher, respondents must preferably have some association with the movement to be able to give meaningful insights to the research problem.

**Research Findings**

Naxalism is a reflection of the prevalent injustice and oppression in the society. It represents the conflict between the values of democratic change and status quo. The birth of Naxalism in India took place on May 25, 1967, during an *adivasi* uprising in Naxalbari, a small village in the Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district, West Bengal. This peasant uprising was instigated by communist leaders against land owners of the State. A deep social malady-malafide transfers, evictions and other anti-people actions of tea gardeners and jotedars were behind the peasant unrest in Naxalbari. Although twenty decades had passed since India gained independence, the country had still retained the colonial land tenancy system of the British. Subsequently, nearly 60 % of the population was landless and the lion's share of the land was owned by the richest 4 % (Census, 1971). Deeply influenced by the young and fiery ideologies of the Marxist-Leninist movement, the forbearers of the Naxalite movement envisioned a spontaneous mass upsurge all over India that would create a 'liberated zone'.

The prevailing social and economic issues in the country were the factors responsible for the genesis of the Naxalite movement. These issues were longstanding and there was no dearth of reform legislation. However, the spirit of the law remained confined to paper and the people

were left to languish. The attempt of the government to abolish zamindari created a class of rich peasants from the backward classes. With the spread of communist ideology, there was greater mobilization of the sharecroppers (bargadars) and landless laborers, who mostly belonged to the so-called lower castes and tribes. This polarized the agrarian classes and created an environment of confrontation (Dixit, 2010). The next step of the land reform policy was tenancy reform which aimed to guarantee security of tenure to tenants, ensure fair rent rates and to gain rights of ownership of land he/she cultivates, subject to some restrictions, at well below market rates. This gave powers to the state to inquire into land transfers and cancel the transfer if it was not bona fide. The abolition of the intermediaries proved to be mostly successful. But several loopholes and poor implementation resulted in the landlords being able to retain control over large tracks of land. It failed to protect the rights of the bargadars (sharecroppers), who were the most deprived section of the society.

In addition to the landlords, the money lenders also exploited the oppressed classes that included the sharecroppers and landless laborers. The oppressed groups wanted a new social order with equity and the landed classes wanted to retain the prestige and status that was associated with the zamindars under the old system. The lack of distinction between caste and class relationships at that time, also resulted in the class conflict being manifested as the caste conflict. The implementation of government regulations on forest access often resulted in harassment of the tribals by the government officials. The loss of access to forest produce, which was a significant part of their income and a way of life, led to deep discontent among the tribals. The government policies disturbed the equilibrium in the tribal society. Moreover, their social structure was more conducive to mass mobilization. The bases of the Naxals in West Bengal at Naxalbari, Phansideoa and Kharibari were mainly inhabited by the Santhal, Oraon and Rajbhanshi tribes. Thus, the causes of the Naxalite movement were essentially socio-economic and included agricultural workers, sharecroppers, tenants, and tribals.

The Naxalite Movement also found immense support from the educated youth. Universities became hotbeds of radical ideology and many young Naxalites went off to the forests and rural areas to mobilize the people. The onset of recession signalled the crisis of the capitalist path of development. The problem of unemployment and careers loomed large for these educated youth. Their sense of disillusionment and fiery idealism of youth directed them towards Naxalism. Thus, Naxalism appealed to each of these groups for different reasons.

The researcher is concerned with the postcolonial theory as an academic device and being greatly influential in the emergence of the Naxalite movement in India. Postcolonial theory can be described as a literary theory or a critical approach that focuses on colonial experience from the colonised society's view. It is a theoretical approach that aims to disrupt the dominant discourse of colonial power. It provides a perspective that responds to colonialism and the complicated power dynamic that occurs during the colonial experience and in the aftermath. Postcolonial theory is often considered by modern literary critics as an area of literary and cultural study that seeks very strong resistance to the former colonizer. The focal point of the theory are subjects such as representation, suppression, resistance, race, migration and gender. The postcolonial theory argues that western modernity is essentially tied to European colonialism. It argues that the two most significant experiences in the last six centuries that have played a huge role in shaping the modern world today as we live in are: *Western modernity* and *colonialism.* Postcolonial theory focuses on the postcolonial destabilization of the centre and margin binary of imperial discourse. It critiques colonial modernity and the cultural implications through which the colonized and formerly colonized people engaged with the imperial power. On the basis of findings from literature review and questionnaire survey, the researcher found out conflicting layers of the postcolonial theory and the Naxalite movement to converge and reconcile to form a seamless argument. There are many elements of congruence between the Naxalite movement and Postcolonial Theory. These include glorification of violence, hybridity, mimicry, rejection of colonial education and modernity.

Due to its propaganda of militancy, the Naxalite movement gains parallel with the postcolonial glorification of violence as a tool against oppression. The revolutionary class struggle was connected with an emphasis on the symbolic dimensions of violence. The Naxalite rhetoric displayed a tendency towards the bloodthirsty and Naxalite pamphlets regularly and approvingly reported on how peasants' class hatred led to an irresponsible excess. Annihilations were to be accomplished wherever possible using traditional weapons such as knives, spears, and sickles instead of firearms.

The postcolonial elements of hybridity and mimicry are also evident throughout the Naxal movement. The Naxalites based their revolutionary policies and programmes after the Chinese pattern of revolution endorsed by Mao Tse-tung. The Naxalite leaders (Mazumdar, Sanyal, Kunnikal Narayanan and K.P.R. Gopalan) unhesitatingly declared their unflinching faith and optimism in Maoism. Taking parallels from the Chinese revolution, the Indian

Naxalites discarded parliamentary democracy and electoral politics and instead sternly emphasised on the doctrine of class war. They followed the Chinese line of communism- boycott of elections, denunciation of ministers and their progressive and radical programmes, formation of secret cells, and implementation of conspiratorial policies aiming at power snatching by means of armed revolution.

Rejection of colonial education is an important postcolonial trait that is reflected in the Naxalites attack on educational institutions, the urban middle-class Naxal youth were victims of a hybridized political emotion. They embodied two conflicting emotional paradigms, reflections of the psychological attitudes of the two blocks of bipolar universe- the optimism of the socialist world, and the disbelief, doubt, disillusionment and despair of the Western world. Overpowered by sentiments, the students were used to perform democratic and socialist revolution simultaneously. Such activities as burning educational institutions, libraries, laboratories and destroying the educational system were prescribed. Statues of prominent figures were decapacitated, blackened and vandalized, and their portraits were torn and trampled upon. The victims included Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Rammohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda and other luminaries of the Bengal Renaissance. The Naxalites accused them of abandoning their contemporary peasants in their uprisings against the British colonial rule. The Naxals rejected the colonial education system endorsed by Mahatma Gandhi and Rammohan Roy. Their hatred towards the tenets of colonialism and capitalism being taught in educational institutions saw expression in the form of statue smashing of such leaders. This rejection of modernity and colonial education finds similarity in the postcolonial critique of colonial modernity. According to postcolonial theory, western modernity propagates the ideals of 'progress' by practicing ruthless economic plunder, distorting cultures and knowledge, and killing innocent natives. Another thread of congruence between the Naxalite movement and postcolonial theory is their emphasis on the indigenous identity and values of the colonized/oppressed. The Naxal discourse is rooted in resistance, often taking refuge in orality, folktales, and emergent urban dialects like the Calcutta cockney. In this context, the Naxalite movement is congruous with the postcolonial emphasis on the values and morality of native culture, their traditions and weapons.

On the other hand, the researcher also found elements of incongruence between the Naxalite movement and postcolonial theory. The Naxalites' inability to transcend beyond the

principles of Eurocentric Marxism and colonial modernity, and failure to achieve Swaraj on account of Sinocentrism are some threads of incongruence between the Naxalite movement and postcolonial theory. In spite of their emphasis on peasant revolution, the Naxalites never publicly rejected the Western European prevalent in the Eurocentric, conventional, and mainstream Marxism. They vehemently attacked the colonial aspect but at the same time half-heartedly rejected the aspect of modernity. The Naxalite leadership subscribed to the principles of Eurocentric Marxism and stressed on concepts such as proletarian leadership establishment in the Indian revolution, economic class analysis and organizational regimentation of the party based on the principles of democratic centralism.

Furthermore, the hegemonic discourse and epistemological power prevented the Naxalite leadership from overcoming the limits of Eurocentric Marxism and colonial modernity. The uniqueness of the socio-economic and political conditions of India demanded from the Naxalites an alternative approach of social and fundamental transformation beyond the traditional Eurocentric Marxism. These conditions forced them to pursue this search in an undirected and sporadic level but the all-embracing power of colonial modernity still remained rooted in their consciousness. The Naxalites' insistence on mimicking the Chinese revolution was a major reason for their failure to achieve *Swaraj*. In place of Eurocentric Marxism, the Naxalites imitated the experiences of the communists of the People's Republic of China. Their ideology could be termed Sino-Centric and they openly duplicated the documents of the Chinese Communist Party and the writing and formulations of Mao Zedong. Thus, the Naxalites failed to explore an alternative path to Indian revolution beyond Eurocentric Marxism and suffered due to pervading colonialism within their consciousness. They blindly replaced Eurocentrism with Sino-centrism which resulted in their failure to achieve complete independence in the Indian revolution.

**Relevance of the study**

Postcolonial theory takes many different forms and interventions, but all exist on the same fundamental claim: the world we inhabit is impossible to understand except in relationship to the history of imperialism and colonial rule. Opposition to colonial rule was spearheaded by forms of nationalist struggle which cannot offer a blueprint for dealing with inequities of the contemporary world order. Many struggles in the postcolonial world are sceptical about precisely those forces and discourses that were responsible for formal decolonisation. Postcolonial theory addresses those questions that emerge in relation to the

aftermath of colonialism. To be concerned with postcolonialism, is to be concerned with a set of questions at the heart of modern political thought.

The Naxalite movement is an important part of the history of modern India in the post-independence era. There are many studies that have attempted to understand the movement from the Marxist or Nationalist theoretical perspectives. However, there has been no theoretical critique of the Naxalite movement using principles of postcolonial theory. There have been several literary attempts to trace the evolution of the Naxalite movement but none have studied the movement from the postcolonial perspective. The several studies on Postcolonial theory have mainly dealt with the postcolonial literature and concepts whereas the studies on the Naxalite Movement have focused majorly on a descriptive analysis and criticism from a theoretical perspective other than the postcolonial perspective. The postcolonial themes of *resistance to social injustice*, *violence against oppressor*, *mimicry* and *hybridity* are central to the Naxalite movement. However, there is a gap in the literature that connects the Naxalite movement with these principles of postcolonial theory. The researcher aims to bridge this gap by creating an interphase between these two separate entities and put postcolonial theory in the context of the Naxalite movement.

**Conclusion**

Western colonial modernity has taken up a huge place in the Indian epistemology in the field of socialism and communism, not only during the British colonial period but also post-independence in 1947. Indian postcolonial fiction has often addressed the failure of India to live up to the promises of social, economic, ecological justice that decolonization harboured. The unending history of continued violence directed at Dalit communities and marginalized ethnicities like the Adivasis has been an important concern of postcolonial studies. Postcolonial theorists have identified many reasons for the inequality that keeps maligning the Indian society- persistence of Eurocentric epistemologies in Indian political and social life, the insidious nature of the Hindu caste system, and the complex juggernaut that is modern day capitalism.

The aim of the present research was to analyse the Naxalite movement using the postcolonial perspective. Franz Fanon, one of the pioneers of postcolonial theory, glorified the violence undertaken by the struggling people of the colonies. Charu Majumdar, a prominent leader of the Naxalite movement, similarly glorifies violence. They associate violence with

self-sacrifice that leads to martyrdom. The Naxalites employed it against the state and its army and police, and also against the perpetrator *jotedars* and *zamindars.* The Naxalites gave moral overtones to violence and considered it as noble, ethical and a matter of principle. There is a stark difference between the glorification of violence perpetuated by Fanon as opposed to that by Majumdar. Fanon glorified violence and explained it as moral in the context of colonial situation. But Majumdar's celebration of violence is class-based. According to Majumdar, peasants' life was centred around the invisible, structured violence of the semi-feudal and semi-colonial state. To overcome this structural violence, it was important for the peasants to reciprocate with revolutionary violence.

The Naxalite movement organized the peasants' armed uprisings and projected a New Democratic Revolution by creating base areas in the countryside. The Naxalites followed the Chinese model of peasants' armed uprisings in the rural areas of the state as opposed to the Russian model which propagated workers' uprisings in cities and towns. At the heart of the Naxalite ideology, the peasants were the most important stakeholders in the Indian revolution. The emphasis on peasants' role in the Naxalite movement was congruous with the postcolonial theoretical position in which the European model in which armed resistance launched by the peasants in the colonies and post-colonies was endorsed.

The Naxalites laid emphasis on the values and morality of the peasants, their struggling traditions, folk culture, tribal festivals, indigenous weapons, ideas of resistance and historical memories of past struggles against the exploitation by landlords and police. They kept alive the aspirations of peasants and tribals of a society free from exploitation and social consciousness. The Naxalite ideology found place in the hearts of the urban, middle class, educated college and university students. The urban youth were disenchanted with the exploitative, elitist, colonial and semi-colonial education still prevalent in post-independent India. The continued colonial narrative of the inferior other propagated by the western education, the 'other' in this context being the illiterate and poor peasants, was unacceptable to many who were drawn towards the Naxal ideology. This led to the urban youth abandoning cities and joining the peasants and integrating themselves in the peasants' lives in the villages.

The movement also saw strong criticism of distinguished national leaders of pre-independence era like Mahatma Gandhi, Raja Rammohun Roy and others for their acceptance of British colonial education and culture. The Naxalites accused them of abandoning their contemporary peasants in their uprisings against the British colonial rule. The modernist elite

national leaders did not support the leaders of such peasant uprisings since many of the peasant leaders advocated restoration of the feudal rule and desired to establish a religious regime on the basis of spiritual principles. For the modernist elite leaders, the peasants' uprisings were retrogressive, traditional and reactionary with no rational action plan. However, the Naxalites considered these armed uprisings as genuine anti-colonial struggles by the hardworking Indian peasants, notwithstanding their ideological confusion and theoretical limitations. The Naxalites therefore believed that statues of Mahatma Gandhi should be replaced with those of Bisra Munda, Sidho and Mangal Pandey who pioneered armed uprisings against the British colonial rule.

Thus, the Naxalite politics unconsciously shifted focus from the colonial modernist paradigm ingrained in the ideology of Indian mainstream communism. They publicly attacked the colonial aspect, but at the same time tacitly rejected the aspect of modernity. The Naxalite ideology does not make any conscious attempt to transcend, overcome and reject the paradigm of colonial modernity. The Naxalite leadership openly endorse Eurocentric Marxist concepts such as establishment of proletarian leadership in the Indian revolution, economic class analysis on the basis of mode of production, Leninist concept of proletarian part as the vanguard of revolution, organizational regimentation based on principles of democratic centralism, and final instalment of proletarian dictatorship. They never publicly rejected these Western European principles prevalent in the Eurocentric, official, established mainstream Marxism.

On the basis of these findings, the researcher believes that the present work is a significant addition to the body of literature on the Naxalite Movement and postcolonial theory. Postcolonialism does not only imply as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism. The Naxalite movement, that took place in postcolonial India as an aftermath of the semi-feudal and semi-colonial policies of the independent state, aligns with and also deviates from the postcolonial theory. Hence, this critique is important as it gives a unique perspective to one the most significant movements in the history of post-independence India.

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